

**Business as Unusual: Aiming for Superior in the Russian Language Flagship**  
**Sandra Freels, Portland State University**

**Aiming for Superior: A Memorial Conference Honoring the Legacy of Olga Kagan**  
**University of California, Los Angeles**  
**May 31, 2019**

It is truly an honor for me to have been invited to present at today's conference in memory of Olga Kagan. Olga and I worked closely together during the last ten or so years when we were both developing and directing undergraduate Russian Flagship Programs. It seems likely that during all that time we must have discussed *something* other than Flagship, but I honestly can't remember what. Instead, I remember that no matter where our conversations started, they always circled back to the crucial question: How in the world are we going to get undergraduate students from Novice to Superior?<sup>1</sup> My remarks today are necessarily going to be somewhat historical and anecdotal, but in them I hope to recapture a little bit of the flavor of those many conversations.

When I was an undergraduate, it was customary for tenure-track faculty, the scholars, to concentrate either on literature or linguistics while language instruction was provided by so-called contingency faculty, often graduate teaching assistants. Typically, one studied the mechanics of the language during the first two years of an undergraduate curriculum and then during the last two years focused on more specialized courses, again in literature or linguistics. High-achieving students might expect to graduate with Intermediate-High proficiency in Russian and with very few career prospects other than applying to graduate school to become professors—either of literature or linguistics. It's possible that programs of this type no longer

---

<sup>1</sup> Flagship Programs use the proficiency scale of the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR), according to which students must progress from 0 to 3. I am using the terminology of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) for ease of narration.

exist, and yet I think there are vestiges of them about that we all recognize. It is the model that I think of as “business as usual.”

Recognizing the reality of the business-as-usual model, in its early days the National Security Education Program (NSEP) initially funded post-baccalaureate programs that were designed to take high-achieving language majors from Advanced to Superior. Programs funded included a Russian Consortium, of which UCLA was a member. In 2008, NSEP transitioned to purely undergraduate programming by funding new programs, including my own at Portland State University, and inviting existing programs, including UCLA’s, to develop new undergraduate curricula. At that point things became decidedly unusual.

A business-as-usual language program is typically built from the bottom up. You offer First-Year Russian, see what you get, and then start Second-Year either from where you left off, or worse, hand off your First-Year students to a Second-Year teacher who has no idea what they learned in First-Year but deeply suspects that all of it was wrong. Flagship Programs develop differently. We know from the outset that our students are expected to achieve Superior (ILR 3 “General Professional Proficiency”) in Russian by the time of graduation. Our task, then, is to work backwards from that goal to determine what skills and abilities they need in order to progress from each level to the next. “Backward planning,” as it is known, is highly recommended for all language programs but not often practiced in real life.

Flagship students typically spend three years in a Domestic Program, such as UCLA’s, preparing for a Capstone Year at a Flagship Overseas Center. In order to qualify for admission to the Overseas Center students must achieve Advanced or, better yet, Advanced High proficiency in Speaking, Reading, and Listening. Ideally, students enter Domestic Programs as freshmen already knowing some Russian, but in reality, because Russian is taught at so few secondary

institutions in this country, most of them enter as true beginners: Novices or ILR 0. The task of the Domestic Program, then, is to bring students from Novice to Advanced or Advanced High within a period of three years, and because Advanced High implies partial control of Superior functions, they, too, must be cultivated to the greatest extent possible during that three-year period of time.

Working backwards, then, from an end goal of “General Professional Proficiency,” we realize that prior to their Capstone Year our students need to be able to communicate with tolerable accuracy and fluency on just about any topic that might arise in polite conversation. We can no longer focus exclusively on the literature and culture of the languages that we teach but must instead broaden our offerings to include a much wider range of topics and materials. Flagship programs, for the most part, address this need through some sort of interdisciplinary language learning. Some fortunate programs are able to recruit faculty from other departments to teach courses in, say, Biology in the target language, while others develop in-house sequences targeting the language of the humanities, the natural sciences, and the social sciences that are taught by foreign language professionals. Such courses, when taught in the target language, are commonly called “content classes.”

Although Flagship programs cannot afford to focus narrowly on the study of literature *per se*, literature and increasingly cinema continue to play a significant role in the undergraduate curriculum. Works of fiction have unparalleled ability to introduce diverse subject matter, to provide models of verbal and social interaction, including the tailoring of language, and—something I think is tremendously important for Russian—to foster the ability to read between the lines. “Yeah, that’s what he said, but what did he mean?” I would also argue that a well

structured discussion of the issues raised in works of fiction is the most natural way to elicit Superior level functions in an academic setting.

Flagship students can and do major in subjects ranging from Musicology to Microbiology. During their Capstone Year they will be expected to take mainstream university courses in their major discipline. Inevitably, then, a Domestic Flagship Program must not only add breadth but also depth to the undergraduate curriculum. Flagship programs approach this question of disciplinary depth, or “domain training,” as it is commonly known, in various ways depending on their resources. Some programs are able to offer independent Language for Special Purposes courses, such as “Business Arabic,” for example, but the majority rely on Individualized Language Instruction, aka “tutoring,” provided by native informants. At some institutions the tutors may be graduate students either within the language department itself or sometimes within in the Flagship student’s major department, while at others they may be community members. Tutoring programs are structured differently at different institutions, but, to the best of my knowledge, all of them have the ultimate purpose of fostering the linguistic depth that will permit students eventually to do original research in their respective disciplines. Needless to say, recruiting, training, scheduling, and supervising tutors adds yet another layer of complexity to already crowded curricula.

Students may graduate from business-as-usual programs with no clear career prospects, but Flagship student fully expect to pursue careers where they will be able to put their language skills to use. This expectation leads to what I think of as a third distinguishing feature of Flagship programs: an emphasis on applied language skills. Flagship students almost always are required to conduct research and write papers in their target language, but just as frequently they also are asked to share their work publicly perhaps in an in-house publication or a public presentation, or

perhaps at a larger undergraduate research conference, such as the one that UCLA hosts each year, or even in a virtual format across Flagship institutions, as the Russian Flagship students did earlier this year.

Flagship students acquire linguistic sophistication and professional polish from presenting their work in public, but they also need to learn how to use their language skills in other, less-controlled environments. All Domestic Flagship Programs anticipate that their students will complete a semester-long internship during their Capstone Year abroad. Looking ahead to that day, some programs include a formal community-based-learning component in their curriculum while others, informally, encourage students to apply their skills in a wide variety of community settings such as non-profit refugee resettlement organizations, elementary and secondary school programs, health organizations, local businesses, crime enforcement agencies, and so on. Experiential learning experiences, when successful, can expand the students' understanding of the language and the culture of the workplace, but in order to be effective they require that the host organization have realistic expectations about the time constraints and linguistic abilities of the language learners, and they require the academic institutions to provide not only linguistic support but also opportunities to process and understand the experiences that they have had while working in the community.

To my mind these three things—increased breadth and depth along with a clear emphasis on applied language skills—are the hallmarks of Language Flagship Programs, but they bring with them other distinguishing features. Students of Russian in a business-as-usual program usually have fairly similar profiles (you know, Russian majors who hope eventually to read Dostoevsky). Students of Russian in a Flagship program are likely to be more diverse if only because they come from different academic departments with different ways of doing things.

Students of Computer Science who expect to receive all of the homework assignments on the very first day of class cannot be ignored—they really *do* need highly predictable schedules—but they also need to be educated about the iterative nature of language acquisition and to the extent possible be made complicit in their own education.

And then there are the heritage students. I will not dwell on them except to say that they play a very real role in many Flagship programs and certainly in Russian. When heritage speakers first appeared in American classrooms, the reaction of many teachers, including myself, was “Yikes, native speakers! Get ‘em out of here!!” Closer acquaintance, classroom observation, and certainly Olga’s research have helped us understand that there are many different kinds of heritage speakers and that they are by no means native speakers. At most they have a phonological facility that makes them *sound* like native speakers, but they often have gaps in their command of Russian (no instrumental case, for example), and if they came to the United States as young children or if they were born here, they will have had no experience with the quotidian language and culture of the target country, and they certainly have no vocabulary for talking about the academic subjects (including their own majors) that they have only ever experienced in English.

So if we aren’t going to exclude them from the classroom, what *are* we going to do with them? A Russian-speaking student who is functionally illiterate almost certainly will benefit from learning literacy skills in a sheltered environment rather than being placed in a beginning Russian class, but others whose reading, writing, and speaking skills qualify them for placement in upper-division content classes will just as certainly benefit from interaction with L2 classmates, just as the L2 learners will benefit from interaction with them. L2 students may initially be intimidated by the apparent fluency of their classmates, and heritage students, who

may regard Russian as a private code for communication with family and friends, may initially resist altering ingrained speaking patterns, but in the long run both kinds of learners are preparing to take mainstream university classes conducted in Russian and to complete internships where they will be expected to sound and behave as young professionals, and both of them will need to acquire rich and varied vocabulary and to learn to tailor their language appropriately for many different formal and informal settings if they are to succeed.

And then there is grammar. In their haste to jettison grammar-translation and embrace more proficiency-oriented approaches to instruction some business-as-usual programs decided to privilege spoken communication without regard for accuracy, thereby condemning their students to sound like tourists for the rest of their lives. Flagship students, who aspire to “General Professional Proficiency,” cannot afford any pattern of errors, especially ones that would irritate a native speaker, but do they really need to be able to talk *about* grammar? After all, most educated native speakers of English can’t begin to explain “sequence of tenses”; they just *do* it. Again, the answer, unfortunately for heritage students, is “yes.” Flagship students are preparing to study at a foreign university in a foreign country where grammar *is* studied and discussed. The students’ job is not to export American classroom practices, but to experience and learn to understand those of the host country, and Russian as a Second Language instructors both in Russia and in Kazakhstan, where the Overseas Flagship Center now is located, expect all students, no matter how their Russian was acquired, to be familiar with grammatical terminology and to be able to use it appropriately.

In my opening remarks I mentioned that high achieving students of business-as-usual programs might expect to graduate with Intermediate High proficiency in Russian, but in truth they would have had no such expectation because their language skills would never have been

evaluated. Accountability is another hallmark of Flagship Programs and another significant deviation from business as usual. All Flagship programs anticipate receiving formative external reviews at regular intervals, and all Flagship students receive repeated formal and informal evaluations of their language skills throughout their program of study. One of the effects of repeated testing is to create realistic expectations about the language learning process and thereby to engage students as partners in their own education. I remember well the business-as-usual student who explained to me that she expected to be “fluent” after spending the summer in a sports camp in Siberia and compare her to the Flagship student whom I recently heard ask his teacher what specific gains in Speaking he might expect from studying in Taiwan over the summer.

Finally, I want to mention something that I see not as an additional challenge but as a clear benefit: Flagship is collaborative. Faculty in business-as-usual programs sometimes find themselves working in isolation. Second-Year language teachers have no idea what goes on in First-Year, and literature courses, even when taught in the target language, may be developed without any consideration for the proficiency levels of the participants. Faculty within a Flagship program, as I have already said, work closely together if only out of necessity, but we also find them working closely both with faculty from other disciplines within their own institutions and with Flagship faculty from other institutions both within and across individual language programs. Their sense of shared purpose and collaboration extends to their students who meet and interact either at Flagship sponsored events or in venues created by Flagship faculty expressly for that purpose. Some years ago Dr. Anna Kudyma and I worked together on a model for a virtual “Flagship Cafe” that permitted students from what were then four Russian Flagship Programs to interact both with each other and with their counterparts from the Linguistic

University of Nizhny Novgorod. That program and other like it are stimulating for faculty, but more to the point they permit students to learn from their peers, perhaps not the best and most reliable teachers in the world, but certainly the most influential and memorable.

So, as promised, no answers—only questions, but they are the questions that smart, talented, generous people like Olga think about every single day. Almost every thing that I have mentioned—teaching subject matter that we were never trained to teach, teaching to levels of proficiency that require new methodologies, sending our students into the world to use their language in environments over which we have no control, interacting with students who *know* things that we don't know, and subjecting our programs and our students to *constant* evaluation—take teachers far outside of their comfort zones, but on the bright side—the business is always unusual, no one will ever be bored, and the results are truly “S/superior,” in both senses of the word.